

Episode 6: Heartful Parenting Practice: Family Meeting

Christy Keating 00:04

Hi, friends, and welcome to The Heartful Parent Podcast. I'm your host, Christy Keating. In this podcast, we talk about it all, our parenting, our partnering, and our professional lives, because they are all a part of us, and we were never meant to do this alone.

Hello, hello, hello Heartful Parent Podcast community, I am so excited to have you back for another episode of the podcast this week. And for full disclosure, sometimes as you might know, as a parent, things don't go as you planned. And this is one of those weeks. So I have some amazing guests lined up. And unfortunately, my guest for this week had to reschedule. And then my schedule got wonky with a sick dog and just trying to navigate some other things around parenting and partnering and business ownership and all of that. And so, for this week, you get another episode with me. And next week, we'll have another fabulous, fabulous guest for you. But as I was thinking and sort of getting ready to dive into chatting with you this week, I was really conscious about wanting to provide you with some tools that you could walk away from this podcast with and use tonight, or tomorrow night or this week.

And so what we're going to talk about is one of my absolute absolute favorite Positive Discipline tools, and that is family meetings. Now, depending on how you were raised, the idea of a family meeting may sound awesome, or it may strike fear into your core. When I was once working with a client and talking about family meetings, she said to me, oh my god, the idea of a family meeting makes me want to like poke my eyeballs out. Because when she was growing up what a family meeting meant in her family was that every you know, three to six months or so, Dad would call a family meeting. And she and her siblings would sit on the couch, mom would sit in the chair, and Dad would proceed to yell at everybody about what they'd been screwing up doing wrong, you know, making them mad about and that they needed to fix right away. And it was a very authoritarian style of parenting. It was a very unpleasant experience for everyone involved, probably for dad to write even though he was in charge, it doesn't feel good to be that dysregulated and to be yelling at, you know, at the people that you love. And so her association with a family meeting was that

I think that might be true for many of us. They may not have been formally called family meetings. But we may all remember moments where our parents called us together or one parent called us together to have a conversation about something they were pissed off about. This is a completely different kind of family meeting. The type of family meetings I'm going to propose to you today are; I think they're fun, they are certainly connecting, and that is important right now, especially in light of the last few episodes of the podcast. Where in episode three, we talked about the February report that was released by the CDC and sort of the sad state of affairs for our youth, our teens. And then an episode four Sherra



Grasser came and spoke about what she sees as a teen empowerment coach as the root cause of the changes that we're seeing and what Sherra said and what I 100% agree with as a you know, another expert in the space is that disconnection is what is fueling what we're seeing with our teens. And of course that disconnection starts when our children are much younger, and it continues when they are much older. And probably many if not all of us as parents are also feeling that sense of disconnection.

This is one of the reasons I love family meetings because, it is designed, a family meeting, is designed at its core purpose, to build connection among family members. And we know based on the research, that connection with family is for our children sort of of key importance, even through the teen years when they are individuating. They are, you know, figuring out who they are, they're going off into the world, they might seem like they don't want anything to do with us. But that, that anchor of our families is still really important. And, and we can still make that anchor stronger so that when our teens finish their individuation process, and are sort of eager or ready to come back into the fold, that connection is still there. And for our little ones, we are building that deep connection in a way that is fun. And it sort of provides the scaffolding for their, for the changes and the, the maturing and the growing up that they will do over the years.

So we're going to dig in a little bit today to how do you have a family meeting? What does it actually look like? Because it's one thing to say, hey, you should go have a family meeting. And everyone goes, Okay, that's great. So we'll sit down at the table, we'll all look at each other and say, anyone have anything you want to address. And for the most part, people will probably say no. Or, as we heard from that example, that I shared from one of my clients, one of the parents will start lighting into a kid or all the kids about what's not going right. And that is not the recipe for a successful family meeting that family members will want to repeat week after week, we're going to talk about how you make it something that family members will want to repeat week after week, and that it feels fun and connecting.

When done well. family meetings are as I've said, they're excellent for building connection. They are, I think, a wonderful way to learn. And practice treating one another with respect. I hear a lot of parents say, 'My kid is so disrespectful or they're never kind to their sibling.' And family meetings are a great way to create and build up mutual respect in a family, which is a critical component of good connection. And family meetings are also a wonderful place to develop problem solving skills, maybe to practice our own problem solving skills, and to help our children develop healthy problem solving skills. Which means we don't come in as the adult and say, 'This is how we're going to fix this problem.' Right? We are engaging our kids. It's and in the process of that it really helps enhance cooperation and closeness. And then I've said this, but I think family meetings can be really fun. And they can help us plan fun and be intentional about the fun that we bring into our lives. Because let's be honest, when we're super busy, and we're all running from place to place, and we're we've got work or we're running a business, and we've got kids sports and kid activities in school and maybe caring for a baby or an elderly parent



or you know, whatever you have on your list. Sometimes we have to plan fun. And so we can use these family meetings as a reminder, that part of the reason we had kids in the first place was because we thought it would be fun. So what has happened to all the fun, right? Let's bring that back.

I've kind of alluded to this, but I want to make it really, really clear that what a family meeting is not for is an opportunity for us as parents to fix things, to impose rules to impose consequences to impose solutions. Anytime you put that rule impose or enforce, you know, we get into risky territory. And we've we need to be careful a little bit about that. So as a part of that there should also be no lecturing. There should be no controlling. No arguing there can be friendly, disagreement, respectful disagreement, but there shouldn't be all out arguments. There should be no demeaning from us to our children from them back to us or between siblings or other family members. No parading no belittling like nothing that doesn't feel good, right? We are I'm going to teach you a method for this that really sets up a family meeting in such a way that it feels like a positive experience for everyone involved.

The other thing I will note, and I'm saying this as a mom, who loves to be right. I don't know Do many people that don't. But yeah, I like to be right about stuff, I like to feel like I know what I'm talking about. This is not a time to enforce that, like, I'm going to be right, I'm going to prove to you that I'm right. It is also not a time to expect perfection from our kids. There will be some meetings where our kids are super engaged, there will be some meetings where maybe they are not so much. And if you have really little kids, you know, the they have a limited attention span.

For by way of history. We've been doing family meetings in my home for about six years. And we first started doing them before my youngest daughter was born. And then we continued them after her arrival, and when she was a teeny, tiny baby. If she wasn't like asleep, you know, upstairs, she was at the table with us in a rocker in a bouncy seat, and you know, whatever it was, or, you know, my husband and I was wearing, we were wearing her on our bodies, but she was there was she participating? No, of course not. And it really took several years before she was able to actively participate. But by having her present for as long as she could do that, and we would, you know, give her coloring crayons or whatever, for as long as she could be present, she was sort of getting, for lack of a better word indoctrinated in the culture of our family, and taught that these family meetings are just what we do, that they are a part of our normal regular weekly schedule. And then as she was able to talk, you know, she would every now and then at a very young age, three-ish, try to to participate by giving a compliment, we'll talk about those.

And now by age five, coming up on six real quickly, she is an incredibly active participant in the meetings, she gives full appreciations for everyone at the table, she talks about the schedule with us gives weighs in on issues that are coming up, not always in a super helpful way yet, but we're working on that. And she gets excited for these meetings. So the sooner that you start these meetings, the better, but you cannot expect that perfection from them. Right? This is really a time to build community connection, cooperation, we'll build those things while we are developing some other important skills.



So ease into it. And and you can start early, but don't expect your two year old or your three year old or even your four year old to be a really you know, active participant or lend a lot to the meeting. But by 567 and beyond, you know, obviously well into the teen years they can participate and and really play a role in that meeting. One of the great things about family meetings is that they are super flexible. There are some mandatory components, and I'm going to share those with you. But they're really, really flexible. Well, I should say it there is a mandatory element of who is present and there is a flexible element to who is present.

It is should be mandatory, that everyone who was living in the home or is a family member attend the family meeting. Now in my case, we have an Au Pair living in our home, she is always welcome in and invited to our family meetings. But under the rules of the Au Pair program, because those aren't her work hours, we cannot require her to attend. So we don't. But when we have family staying with us, or if we are traveling with family, we wrap those family members, grandparents, whoever it might be, we wrap those family members into the family meeting. And we teach them how to do it. This is not something either my husband or I grew up with. So yes, everyone who lives in your home, who you can make be there, you should require to be there. Anyone else who lives in your home should be invited or who is staying with you should be invited. Obviously, you're not going to force a visitor to attend but you can invite them. And then we get to the required elements. And there really are, I would say four required elements to any family meeting to make it a truly productive, effective family meeting. Okay.

So the first one and this should be the first thing that you do is when everybody sits down, you hand out compliments and appreciations. And what this looks like it can actually, to be fair, it can look at a number of different ways, I'm going to tell you what it looks like in my family. So in my family, it is we go around the table, and each of us shares an appreciation for every other person at the table. And then we turn that on ourselves and share an appreciation for ourselves. And it's generally time boxed to the previous week. So something we appreciate about that person in the previous week or so. Now, with my little ones, sometimes time is fluid for her. And so she can't remember what happened when and so, you know, she will sometimes share appreciations that aren't super timely, but but we don't again, because we're not expecting perfection, we don't sweat it. But you share an appreciation. And then as I said, you turn it on yourself. Why do you turn it on yourselves. So you do that, because it helps kids express pride, without bragging about it in a rude way. You know, or rubbing in in a siblings face or a friend's face.

And it helps them see and understand what others do for them. So that so called the invisible labor, which we are going to dig into in the podcast. So you know, for mom or dad to say, you know, I appreciate myself this week, because I got all the Christmas cards done, or I packed all the lunches or I painted the bathroom, or I drove you around to everywhere you needed to go and I got you there on time this week. It can be anything. Sometimes I appreciate something that I did in my business, so that



my kids can hear what it what it looks like. And sounds like to run a business. And that really gives them a little bit more insight into who their parents are what their parents do. You know what our days are filled up with because they don't always know. They don't always ask. And frankly, they don't always care. And this gives them an opportunity to lean into that. So the way these compliments and appreciations might look is, you know, as you go around the table saying things like I enjoyed when you asked me to read you a book and we sat down and snuggled together, or I noticed that you were working really hard on your Spanish homework. And I'm super appreciative of that. Or I appreciated the way that you pitched in and helped me with dinner without me asking it all on Thursday. Or I would like to thank Maren, that's my younger daughter. I would like to thank Maren for picking up all her toys without being asked or after being asked without complaint. The one thing that we don't want to include here are any qualifiers. For example, I wouldn't say to my teenage daughter, I really appreciate the way you studied Spanish most days. I mean, you didn't do it on Wednesday. But other than that you did a great job. Right? That's not that is not a whole hearted enthusiastic compliment. And you'd be much better served to say, I really appreciated the way that I saw you dig in and study Spanish this week. You don't need to qualify it with that it didn't happen on Wednesday, or that you didn't pick up your toys on Tuesday, just complement what is there to be complimented.

Okay, so that's element number one. And I've told you how it looks in my family. I know other families will just throw out compliments. And they'll make sure everybody gets complimented at least once. And they'll just kind of let the compliments go till they are done. I like the more formalistic way of doing it, just so that everybody gets complimented by everyone else. Nobody gets left out. Everybody leaves feeling good. And then if there's an extra compliment that you need to throw in there you can. My youngest daughter did that last week. She said, Oh wait, wait, I have another another appreciation for Mama. And she threw one in. That's fine. That's, that's great. But we want to I like starting with the structure. You can work it or set it up how it works best for you.

The second mandatory element of a family meeting and this is what we put second in the agenda is a schedule discussion. And so we pull out the schedule our calendar, and we talk about what it looks like for the week. What days do the kids have something going on? What days do we have something going on? Who's doing pickup or drop off for different events? You know, is there anything unusual? I work many times in the evenings because I'm giving parent presentations at various schools or organizations. And so when that is happening, you know, I let everybody know I won't be here Thursday night, or I'll be grabbing a quick dinner and then running into my office to prevent to present virtually, you know, there are nights when my husband and I go out just the two of us. And we'll let everybody know, hey, Tuesday night, you know, you're on your own for dinner, the Au Pair will be there, my daughter, my older daughter, babysits, you will be, you know, in charge of dinner, here's the food we got you, here's what you'll make.

So we talk about the schedule. And I really love this, because it makes sure that at the beginning of the week, we are all on the same page. Sometimes my older daughter will pop in and say, Oh, I was hoping



to go out to boba tea with friends on Friday, which I guess boba tea is, like a big thing among the teens these days, at least in our area. And so, you know, she'll say, I was hoping to go out after school with my friends, can somebody pick me up so that I'm not taking the bus home? Yes, great. We can make that happen. And so it gives her an opportunity to kind of fill us in on anything she needs. This week, for example, she said, I have a field trip coming up, and I'm going to need a permission slip signed, okay, no problem. So that's the schedule as element of it.

Another reason I really love this from a safety standpoint is, and this applies whether you have an infant or not. But it makes sure everybody knows who is picking up when and where that and doing drop off. So if you have an infant, we've all heard those terrible, horrible stories, where a child, you know, the schedule is out of sync, and a child gets left in the back of a car. There are a number of different ways to prevent that from happening. But one is to review the schedule and review it frequently. Especially when there is something out of the norm.

The other thing that it does, from a safety standpoint is it lets our children know who is picking them up. So let's say my mom was going to go pick up my child, my kids know not to get, you know, not to be picked up, or not to go with anybody other than the regular pickup person, unless we've talked about it. And so making sure they know, hey, you know, my mom, who we call affectionately, buddy, buddy, we'll be picking you up on Thursday. So you know, be aware of that. And that just helps us really dial in that safety, and the and the sort of the check ins that we have with one another. So I really like it from that standpoint. Okay, so we've got compliments, and appreciations. And then scheduled review.

The third element of a family meeting is problem solving. Now, I'm going to recommend that you don't use this element for the first three or four weeks of having a family meeting. Have the family meeting just feel super positive for the first month. And then you can dig into problem solving, when you've got the hang of making appreciations and compliments and talking about the schedule. Once you've got the hang of that you can bring in problem solving. And this is not a time, as I've said this already, for us as parents to fix things, or to dictate or impose a solution. It is time for us as a family to come up with solutions to something that has happened.

There are two ways to come up with the problems that you're going to address. The first is during the week, you can have a list on your refrigerator, where you you know, people can write down an issue that they would like to address at the family meeting. The other way is to just solicit, you know, do we have anything we need to address tonight. And mom, dad, other parent, grandparent, if you know through a regular family member Au Pair, child, anybody, nanny, whoever, whoever lives with you, whoever's out this family meeting can bring up an issue. And so you do this in two ways.

First, you start by reviewing last week's issues and the solutions that you reached. And then you address any new issues that are coming up as a household or between family members. So let's say you see that your kids are fighting a lot you might say so the issue I'd like to raise this week is the



relationship that I've seen between, you know, Hannah, and Oliver, Hannah and Oliver. These are not my children, but Hannah and Oliver. I feel like I've been noticing a little bit more bickering and snarkiness and disrespect between the two of you have the two of you been noticing that or feeling that this week as well. Or Hannah might say, I'd like to raise the issue of all of our always calling me names, and making fun of me or whatever it is right. And then what we do is we might ask some questions out of curiosity, what's being said, and this is without blame, there's zero blame, what's happening? What do we think is contributing to the problem? Is anything going on between the two individuals involved? et cetera, et cetera? We get really curious. And then we say, 'All right, let's brainstorm some solutions.'

And everybody is welcome to throw out solutions, possible solutions. Now, Hannah might say my solution is for all of her to never talk again. Well, okay, great idea. Let's put that on the list. You can write down every solution, knowing that not every solution is actually a good one. Because once you have all the proposed solutions written down, then what you're going to do is you're going to look at each of them. And you're going to ask, do they meet the criteria of the three R's and an H. K? Here's what that means. Are they related? In other words, are they related? Is the solution related to the problem at hand? Is it respectful to the individuals involved? And to our family culture? Is it reasonable? And is it helpful?

So if the solution to Hannah and all of her fighting was that all of her stopped talking, we would look at that. And we say, well, okay, it is related to the problem. It's not very respectful to all of her to say you don't ever get to talk again, it's not reasonable, because that's just not reasonable for him to not talk. And it's not helpful in helping the two of you build a better relationship. So we're going to cross that solution off. If the next proposed solution, however, is that Hannah and Oliver are going to do a quick check in three times a day, and share an appreciation for one another. Is that related? Well, it's related because it might help them feel better about one another. It's certainly respectful.

Is it reasonable? While you have to look at your schedule? Maybe three times a day is not reasonable, given everyone's schedules, but maybe in the morning and at night is maybe when we're driving in the car? It is? That would be reasonable, so we can modify it slightly. And is it helpful? Well, we think it's going to be, but let's try it out for a week and see. So you go through each of the proposed solutions in this way. And then everybody by consensus agrees on something they're going to try. And you give it a try for a week. And then you check in a week later to say, is it working? Did it do well? Do we need to continue doing it? Do we need to try something different? Or is the problem solved?

I have an example from my own family. A number of years ago, we were having a family meeting because my older daughter who was in I think she was in fourth grade. At the time, mornings were a real struggle. I know there are parents out there who can relate to this. I always got up and went to the gym and worked out in the morning, my husband did the morning routine, or at least he got it started. This was before our younger daughter was born. So we would, I would come home from the gym and without fail. I would hear my husband yelling at my daughter, my daughter yelling back super frustrated, she's yelling, I'm doing it, I'm doing it as fast as I can. He's like, you gotta move, you got to go, go go.



You know, they're, they're just not, it's not feeling good to everyone. And it's not feeling good to my husband, and then I'm coming in and trying to like, fix it. And that doesn't feel good to me. You know, I've just gotten home from my own self care, I'm feeling pretty great. And now I come into chaos. And I'm like, we're only trying to get one small human to school. This shouldn't be that hard. And yet it was right. I know, you all know this. So we brought it up in a family meeting. My husband and I had some solutions, like we set a timer that goes off every 10 minutes. Or we I can't even remember what all the solutions were that he and I thought would work. And my daughter looked at us and said, I think the solution should be that you just leave me alone. And let me do it.

And my husband and I looked at each other and we thought, oh boy, this is never ever going to work. But it was related. Right? It was definitely related to the problem. It was respectful. She would feel better respected if we were staying out of her business. It was well whether or not it was reasonable, remained to sort of be seen in terms of you know, was it reasonable to expect a fourth grader to get herself ready for school? I think so. That was my thought at the time. I guess so. And is it helpful? Well, we definitely thought it would kind of calm things down in the morning. So we decided to give it a try. But my husband and I said, we will try this. But here's the deal. If you are running late, your friend who you walked with, will not, we will not ask her to wait for you. And if you are running late, because we said, you don't get the right to make another, you know, another child late for school. And if you are running late, you will have to get yourself to school, we were within walking distance of the school that she attended. And you'll have to go into the office, and you will have to explain the reason that you are late. And you will have to take responsibility for it yourself. You won't get to blame us for it.

And she said, Okay. And so we went away, and for a week, we tried it. And my husband and I, I think we held our breath every day, for a week. And I'll be darned if that kid did not make it to school on time every single day. Now, there were a couple of days where she didn't get to walk with her friend because she was running late. And we let her friend go ahead and go without her. But she then would run till she caught up with her friend or run till she got to school. And she never once was tardy. That solution continues to this day, where now as a middle schooler, she is responsible for getting herself up setting her alarm, getting herself up getting herself dressed, getting ready, being ready for the carpool when it arrives. And she has never once not gotten herself up and ready. I take that back. I think maybe one time, she accidentally turned off her alarm. And we were like, oh, Macy, you gotta get up. So we woke her up. But um, that was really once she got herself up and she gets to school. So that solution turned out to be a sustainable one for our family.

So that's how you problem solve. And if the solution doesn't work, then you go back to the drawing board. If everyone cannot agree on a solution, it doesn't need to be by consensus. So you take a pause, and you either come back to it an hour later. Or depending on the issue at hand. Maybe you re-address it a week later, at your next family meeting, while everyone has had a chance to think about



the solutions proposed what they're willing to compromise on, and you come to an agreement as a group. Obviously, the more people you have in your family, the more difficult that can be. So if the problem only involves two people, for example, they are really the only ones that have to agree to the solution. Again, provided that it is related, respectful, reasonable and helpful.

Okay, after problem solving comes the fourth and final mandatory element of a family meeting, which is really two parts. So Part Four A is to do something fun, eat some ice cream, go for a walk together, you know, play a card game, whatever it is, it can be pretty quick and easy. And Part Four B plan something fun for the week. You know, maybe on Friday night, you're gonna do fondue for dinner, or go to a food truck or watch a movie, or on Saturday, you're gonna go for a hike, or go skiing or whatever. Again, these don't need to be big things. They don't need to be expensive. They don't need to be outings, they can be right there in the comfort of your own home. But there's something that people can look forward to for the week.

So just to review the four mandatory elements of a family meeting our compliments, and appreciations, scheduled discussion, problem solving and finding a solution that is related, respectful, reasonable and helpful. And then doing something fun and planning something fun. There are some other optional ways that you can run a meeting. Some families like to formalize it even more than my family does by choosing someone who's sort of in charge, like running the meeting in you know, moving people along, someone who is the scribe. In other words, they're going to take notes on the meeting. And some families who have trouble being respectful or talking over one another will use something like a talking stick or some object that you pass around. That unless you are holding that you don't you don't get the floor. That can be a way to make these work for families or kids who are a little bit more rambunctious.

Now. When your kids are young these family meetings should not last more than 10 or 15 minutes as they hit those teenage years. If there are more problems to address, you know, even tween late elementary tween teen years, they can go 20-30 minutes if need be, but you don't want to make them overly long. You don't want to make them feel like tedious. Because if you do that nobody's gonna want to attend. So you don't want to address more than I would say two maybe three problems in any given meeting.

Because again, it will turn too long and it will get too tedious. Some other elements that you can include in your family meeting, if you have time, or if you'd like to just rotate things, you can have a discussion of family work, or whose responsibility you know, who's responsible for what in the coming week, I'm a big fan of family work, we will inevitably have some episodes of the podcast about the importance of family work, and children doing chores, and participating in the work of the family. And so a family meeting can be a great time to divvy up those tasks. You can if you do special time with your child, which is one on one time, you can plan that at the family meeting.

Sometimes it's helpful when you're doing appreciations for each person, individually to share a personal failure or room for improvement. I'm a big fan of failure. I think failure is what helps us succeed, it's a



necessary component of success. Sara Blakely, who was the founder of Spanx, the, you know, undergarment company, she tells the story that her dad used to ask her and her brother at every family meal or many family meals, tell me something that you feel that today, and that he would be disappointed if there wasn't something they had failed that because he'd say, then you're not trying, you're not pushing your comfort zone enough. So if that is something that is important to you, the idea of normalizing mistakes and normalizing failure. And taking responsibility can be something you can weave into your family meeting. We do that occasionally. But not every week.

You can have a current events discussion, if you want to, you know if you're a family that cares deeply about what's going on in the world, and you want your kids to be informed in an age appropriate way or to be able to sort of control the narrative a little bit. You can talk about that in a family meeting. You can have a money or finances discussion. If your child gets allowance, this might be a great time to review their spending and their budget. And are they saving, donating and spending? And in what proportions? And what does that look like? You can have a discussion of family values. Sort of if you have like a family mantra, how are y'all doing on your mantra?

You can we sometimes bring family discussion cards, you know, into our family meetings where we ask just questions like kind of get to know your questions. meal planning could be something that could happen in a family meeting. And anything else that feels like it would be valuable to you and your family. The caution here is I just listed off I think nine different things that you could, you know, that are sort of optional, add in elements to a family meeting. Those are great, but they if you try to do all of them or even most of them, you are going to be sitting there for an hour or more. Probably more. Nobody wants that on a weekly basis for a family meeting. Please do not use this as a way to torture your children. This is a way to build connection and cooperation and community with them. Okay, so keep it fun, keep it light, keep it cooperative. And if things start to get tense or derail, take a pause. Everyone can take a deep breath, maybe do an appreciation again if you need to. That in a nutshell is how you have a family meeting.

I think they are one of the most incredible ways to stay connected to our kids, to stay in tune with them, to keep them connected with us and to keep everybody safe, healthy, connected, happy, etc, etc. And working together in a respectful way. I hope this is helpful to you.

I will challenge each and every one of you listening. As soon as you hit stop on this podcast, flip over to your calendar, whether it's on your phone, on your you know on paper calendar, wherever it is, and write down when you're going to do your first or your next family meeting. And then shoot me an email at christy@theheartfulparent.com and let me know how it goes.

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